

A GREAT MERCHANT SEAMAN.

CAPTAIN SQUIRE THORNTON STRATFORD LECKY.

BY F. T. BULLEN.

SUCH is the lamentable ignorance among the majority of our people of matters connected with the Mercantile Marine, that it is exceedingly doubtful whether one out of ten readers of the CORNHILL MAGAZINE will recognise that the name at the head of this appreciation has any claim upon his attention. Were any good to be done thereby, it would be most easy to write a few pages of diatribe against this really criminal neglect of our greatest industry by landspeople; but, alas! we are a pachydermatous folk generally, and are all too apt to say of some strenuous piece of writing, some evidence of an aggrieved advocate unburdening his soul, that a discount of some 95 per cent. needs taking off his statements.

So I will refrain from railing, with a good deal of relief, for it is no pleasant occupation, and endeavour briefly to call attention to the being and doing of a really great man of action, albeit he was all his life but a member of the despised Merchant Service, or the still more despised, in naval circles, Royal Naval Reserve, shamefully nicknamed 'the hungry half-hundred.'

Now if I were writing a biography of my hero instead of just an appreciation of his work as a merchant seaman, it would of course be incumbent upon me to deal comprehensively with his early years, the character of his parents, the sources of his education, &c. But under the circumstances I can plunge at once to the beginning of his sea career as midshipman on board of one of Messrs. Green's grand old frigate-built ships, the *Alfred*, of 1,000 tons register, in the year 1851, when he was fourteen years old. Only half a century ago, but during that fifty-one years more advance has been made in nautical matters, as far as regards shipbuilding and engineering, than in the preceding five hundred. It was delightful to hear the complacency of his tones as he dwelt upon the grandeur of his first ship, mere cockboat as she was to the vessels he commanded later, but tall East Indiaman of those days. Hear him enumerate her crew. Sixty able seamen, every one a sailor in the true sense of the word and

scarce a foreigner among them ; eighteen ordinary seamen, young men who could hand, reef, and steer, but were not yet up to all the complexities of sailing demanded in that stern day from sailors ranking as 'A. B.'; four boys, six mates, and twelve midshipmen, officers in embryo, as they are in the Navy, and paying heavily for the great privilege of receiving their nautical training on board one of the fine frigates of Messrs. Green. I pass over Captain Lecky's summary of the wages earned by the crew as being a subject no landsman cares about, but pause for a moment at the master, who, Captain Lecky says, made over 1,000*l.* a year, not in wages, but mostly in 'primage' (a kind of commission) on the cargo, and because a certain amount of space was always set apart by the owners for the master's private ventures. Of course the *Alfred* carried only first-class passengers, equally of course she was handled exactly like a frigate of the Navy; certain hard and fast rules as to sail-handling and dismantling ship were strictly observed, and altogether it was abundantly manifest that the rigid division now made between Navy and Merchant Service did not then exist. The whole of that fine crew might have been transferred to a vessel of war and they would scarcely have noticed the change. But now a crew of intelligent landsmen would, barring sea-sickness, be just as soon useful on board a man-of-war as a crew as any scratch crowd taken out of a merchant vessel, even supposing the latter could be found all British subjects.

The *Alfred* went leisurely too, calling at Madeira and Cape Town on the outward passage¹ to Calcutta, and on the homeward at St. Helena and the Azores in order to break the monotony of the passage and obtain fresh provisions. But even then some smart passages were made, owing to the consummate seamanship of the commanders. These were the palmy days of sailing occasionally heard of in the fore-castle of a sailing ship from some survival, some worn and haggard old A. B., who, looking scornfully round upon the twenty wastrels of all nations comprising the crew of his 1,500-ton ship, thinks dolefully of vessels like the *Alfred* of 1,000 tons with seventy-eight sailors to handle her.

But young Lecky was not satisfied. The decorated clothing, the quasi-officer status, did not compensate him for what he felt

¹ Nothing more plainly marks the amateur nautical writer than his calling the journey from one port to another a 'voyage.' No sailor does. The round trip from home back to home again constitutes the 'voyage,' all the port to port journeys are 'passages.'

was a great waste of time. These vessels were stately, high-class, altogether admirable, but the upward path was slow, as slow as their passages were up the Hooghli under sail (no tugs in those days) even though handled with the most wonderful seamanship by those aristocrats of the sea, the Calcutta pilots. So upon his return from his first voyage he broke his connection with Messrs. Green, forfeiting all the patronage they were then so well able to bestow upon their pupils, and without saying a word to anyone hied him off to Liverpool, where he indentured himself to Mr. James Beazley, a gentleman totally unknown to him, but in whose ships he felt sure he would get all the opportunities he hungered for of learning the profession he loved. He says parenthetically concerning this bold step, 'I had neither friends nor acquaintances in Liverpool, and had my poor mother only known what I was doing she would have sent a policeman after me.' But she did not know, and the ardent young seaman chronicles with just pride how, before his indentures had expired, he had become successively bosun, third mate, second mate, and chief mate of the *Prince Arthur*, 1,146 tons, esteemed one of the finest clipper ships of her day. Some of these positions had perforce to be held surreptitiously, as the Board of Trade did not permit an apprentice while serving his time to hold a certificate. But immediately upon the expiration of Lecky's time, or at nineteen years of age, he was appointed duly-qualified second mate of Messrs. Beazley's *Star of the East*, a magnificent China clipper, very heavily sparred, with a reputed speed of 17 knots. Lecky naïvely says he 'never saw her go more than 15,' and this coincides with my opinion, based upon considerable experience, that the sailing ship never swam that went more than 16 knots under sail, and the Yankee stories about 21 knots, &c., are what we might expect from this versatile and imaginative people.

Lecky's next venture was a startling one, to those, that is, who know what sea life means. Not succeeding in hitting it off with his new seniors (such a man must always have been a thorn in the side of a less capable superior officer), he left the *Star of the East*, and became second mate of the American ship *Jacob A. Westerfeldt*, proving at once his courage and capacity to rule. It would take far too long to explain why this is so; may it suffice to say that he who can successfully keep his end up as second mate of an American sailing ship must emphatically be a *man*. But one voyage under the Stars and Stripes was enough,

and returning to Liverpool he joined the *Swithamley*, of Liverpool, as second mate. Upon arrival in Kurrachee or Karachi, as the pedants have it, he took his discharge and joined 'Her Majesty's Indian Navy.' Not, he is careful to say, the *Bengal Marine*, or the *Bombay Marine*, or the *Royal Indian Marine*, but a *pukka* 'Navy,' formerly the 'Honourable East India Company's Navy.' In this service he remained as first-class second master, until it was broken up and officers and men dispersed. Lecky had not served long enough for a pension, but a month's pay for each year of service was given him and others like him. Far beyond pay, however, was the experience he had gained, the sea-lore of all kinds with which he had stored his mind, letting no opportunity slip of acquiring such knowledge as should be useful to him later on in his beloved business. His words about the conditions of life in this latter service of the Indian Navy are full of the highest appreciation.

Now he must needs become a peaceful merchantman again, and accordingly we find him making a Southern voyage in the *Nell Gwyn* of Bristol, 'a very smart craft.' But on returning home a chance offers itself for him to risk life and liberty on board the blockade-runner *Bahama*, endeavouring to get into Charleston during the American Civil War. She was not really fast enough, the venture was a disastrous failure, and Lecky, to use his own phrase, found himself 'on his beam-ends.' With all his transcendent abilities he does not seem yet to have acquired the unsailorlike virtue of thrift, and so is glad to ship for the Mediterranean as third mate of a four-masted steamer called the *Bellona*, which was everlastingly breaking down and otherwise making herself a thorn in the flesh to her unhappy officers and crew. On returning to Liverpool Lecky left the *Bellona* at once and obtained a second officer's berth in what was then looked upon as, next to the Cunard, the crack Transatlantic Line. Beginning in the *City of Washington*, he served on board half a dozen of the fine Inman steamers, being then promoted to the position of chief officer of the *City of Manchester*.

This work, however, was far too humdrum for young Lecky (he was even then compiling the book which has made him famous among seafarers everywhere), and he had no fear of taking legitimate risks. So he left the Inman Company's service, much to their annoyance, and superintended the construction of a new S.S., the *Krishna*, building at Liverpool for a newly-formed

company called the 'Bombay and Bengal Steam Ship Company.' He says, 'I did not command her long, for the concern went smash, but my luck held good, for I immediately got command of a screw collier trading between Liverpool, Cardiff, and elsewhere!' Again typical of the man, for there be few sailors who would consider a change from chief officer of an Inman Liner to skipper of a screw collier a bit of luck. He did not find it pleasant himself, and was consequently gratified in no small measure when Messrs. Lamport and Holt, the well-known shipowners of Liverpool, bought her and took over her master and officers. Thenceforward his lines ran pleasantly enough for four-and-a-half years, trading in these comfortable steamers between Liverpool and practically all the ports of Eastern South America. During all this time he was busy in every hour of his spare time (and how much spare time the skipper of a deep-water ship has no one knows but a seaman), improving his own mind and making use of his powers for the benefit of others. It was now that he completed the first edition of his great work, 'Wrinkles in Practical Navigation,' a work that has had a wider circulation (and justly so) than any book of the kind ever written, a book brimful of practical sea-lore, to be found on as many officers' shelves in the Navy as in the Merchant Service, and yet without a line which the author considered would lead people to suppose they could learn seamanship and ship-handling out of books, an idea he abhorred.

Yet Mr. Lecky's career as a shipmaster was still far from being assured and settled for life. Presently we find him, having suddenly left Messrs. Lamport and Holt's employ, sailing as chief officer of the *Patagonia*, then a crack ship of the Pacific Steam Navigation Company. On his return he obtained command, which he kept in various ships of this fine service for six years, contributing during that time an enormous amount of valuable information to the charts of South America, especially those dealing with that most intricate part of the world which includes the western half of the Straits of Magellan and the Gulf of Peñas. The Admiralty charts of those regions all bear Lecky's name, but are gradually being superseded by the results of the closer surveys of modern days, the work of men who have nought else to do. Marine surveying, Lecky declares, was one of his hobbies, marine engineering and iron (steel) shipbuilding another, as distinguished from the business of his life, which was ship-handling and navigation.

Suddenly severing his connection with the Pacific Steam Navigation Company for reasons with which we have here nothing to do, he started with Lord Brassey, at the latter's invitation, on the famous cruise of the *Sunbeam*, but without any official or semi-official position on board—merely as a guest. He only went as far as Buenos Ayres, where an urgent message awaited him requiring his return home for some legal business. He immediately embarked on board an old ship of his, the *Hipparchus*, and came back.

But now—and this will perhaps seem inexplicable to those who do not know the sailor—he found himself stranded, wearing the soles of his boots off in the weary inspection of public buildings gratis, and seeing his wife, his children, and himself growing thinner every day. At last, unable to bear this forced inactivity any longer, this splendid seaman and commander found himself compelled to ship as boatswain of one of the 'City Line' boats, the *City of Mecca*, for Calcutta. On his return the captain, officers, and engineers, jolly good fellows every one, surely without a trace of professional jealousy, but whole-hearted in their admiration of the talented bo'sun, gave him a 'swagger' dinner at the Cannon Street Hotel, and bade him farewell upon his appointment as Commodore Captain of the British steamers of the 'American' line from Liverpool to Philadelphia. He was now in his element. With full powers, honoured, believed in, and fully trusted, he was quite happy. He superintended the building of each new vessel by the great Belfast builders Messrs. Harland and Wolff, and commanded each one at sea when built. Apparently the sea had no more prizes to offer him, and there was before him a certain prospect of a snug berth ashore as ship's husband or overlooker of the Line at no distant date. Yet this was as early as 1884, when he had been only thirty-three years at sea altogether, and in spite of the great lack of continuity in his service, generally a fatal bar to high promotion with any rapidity. He was now in the full vigour of manhood, only forty-seven years of age, with a record behind him, apart from the production of his wonderful book, of which any seaman might well be inordinately proud, even with every advantage that wealth, education, and influence could possibly give. But if seamen as a class were asked what constituted Squire T. S. Lecky's claim to the highest honours among his fellows there would be no dissentient voice—his book. There has never been anything like it 'for navigators in its scope, accuracy, perspicacity, and withal popular

style, whereby the most abstruse questions were made clear to dull minds, easy of working and ready of application. In addition to all his other qualifications, however, he had found time to put in his drill as a Royal Naval Reserve officer, both ashore and afloat, to such good purpose that he was enabled to retire with the rank of Commander, one of the few merchant shipmasters legally entitled to the rank of 'Captain.' He also commanded the *British Prince* transport throughout the Egyptian War of 1882, volunteered to go to the front, went, and gained the medal and star.

In 1884 an advertisement appeared in the principal newspapers inviting applications for the post of Marine Superintendent to the Great Western Railway. In response to this nearly six hundred candidates sought the berth. Captain Lecky cynically details the weeding-out process by means of which this regiment of applicants was reduced to fourteen. These survivors were invited up to Paddington, where by the directors they were gradually brought down to three. And Captain Lecky achieved the high honour of securing the post, in spite of his many highly-placed Naval competitors and the fact that his predecessor had been a Vice-Admiral. Now this to the average landsman may not seem a fact worthy of notice, but indeed it is of the highest import, and one not at all relished in 'Service' circles. Only five instances of the kind come to mind: Mr. Henry Toynbee and Commander Campbell-Hepworth, C.B., R.N.R., to the post of Marine Superintendent of the Meteorological Office, Mr. C. Wilson-Barker to the command of the *Worcester* training-ship, Commander Caius Crutchley, R.N.R., to the secretaryship of the Navy League, and Captain Lecky's appointment, all of which were and are abundantly justified.

Captain Lecky entered upon his new and vast duties fortified by the assurance that he had the entire confidence of the directors, that he as a practical seaman, administrator of nautical affairs, and enthusiast in the mysteries of practical engineering and iron (or steel) shipbuilding would be given a perfectly free hand, and for sixteen years he abundantly justified that confidence. Of course it was open to him to be a figure-head, and, choosing able subordinates, assume credit for their careful work while taking life exceedingly easy himself. Such men are not unknown or difficult to be pointed out to-day. But Lecky threw himself into this new business with all that passion for detail, love of hard work, and indifference to fatigue which had ever

characterised him, positively gloating over the herculean character of his labours. In one of his letters to me he enumerates them, premising that he had no superintending engineer. The supervision of an engineering works employing 250 hands, the Irish Steamship Service, the Weymouth-Cherbourg and the Weymouth-Channel Islands Steamship connections might each have justly claimed the whole of one man's energies, no doubt. But Captain Lecky's energies needed just such an outlet as the whole of these duties combined, and he adds as an afterthought that the oversight of all the Great Western Railway's docks all over the kingdom also devolved upon him. He also says, 'I never knew what hard work really was before' (one may be pardoned for wondering what this man's idea of *really* hard work was), 'but I never was happier, for I loved my work.' Exactly, and to their great honour be it said the Great Western Railway directors recognised this to the full, treating their willing, enthusiastic servant as such a man deserved to be treated, and winning his whole-hearted gratitude for what he calls (as the highest encomium at his command) their perfectly gentlemanly behaviour towards him.

Alas! though spirits be willing, flesh is weak, and Captain Lecky found that, love his work as he might, this mortal veil needed consideration too. Several warnings passed unheeded until two years ago the condition of his throat made it absolutely necessary for him to retire. He was only 63, but he had lived as much as some men would have done had they reached 1000. Thenceforward his letters are sacred, telling of his quest of health, his martyrdom at the hands of specialists (37 operations upon his throat in three months), and underlying them all the grim shadow dogging his fearless footsteps. He who had faced mutinous crews fully armed, who had fought on the battle-field, and been all his sea-life in constant touch with horrible forms of mortal disintegration, had now to lie and wait the stealthy approach of the conqueror, never more terrible than under circumstances like these.

His complaint was diagnosed as granular pharyngitis, but one cannot help suspecting a grimmer spectre behind that glib description. However, that may pass, for he is dead.

And I, his humble and quite inefficient chronicler, ask forgiveness for offering this tribute to his memory under the plea that such men as he are far too little thought of by this nation of *laissez-faire*. In the Merchant Service, Squire Thornton Stratford

Lecky was reared, in the fullest sense of the term. He owed no college allegiance; his wonderful attainments in mathematics, engineering, and shipbuilding were all earned by strenuous application while at sea, and followed up as occasion offered ashore, and his example should be a most stimulating one to shipmasters to-day. It speaks strenuously to merchant shipmasters to raise themselves, to cry aloud and spare not. It tells them no longer to endure the callous ignorance of the nation generally, the cold neglect of their naval confrères (how the latter will 'squirm' at this word!), and the venomous detraction by hungry guinea-seeking clerks, knowing mathematics and nought else, who would make of every shipmaster a blear-eyed pedant, unfit for aught save detraction of his fellow-man, born of impotent envy.

This is no place to introduce anecdotes of Captain Lecky's career. But I may be pardoned for giving just one, as showing conclusively that Captain Lecky was not merely a consummately able shipmaster with all that such a title implies, but also a 'tall fellow of his hands,' a quality that counts so enormously at sea for good or evil accordingly as it is used. When he was mate of the *Prince Arthur* he had a *very* rowdy crew (the emphasis is his own and means a great deal) of 33 hands. Now let him tell his own story. 'One evening, after I had had a big fight with this lot, I called the carpenter on to the poop and explained that in future whenever he saw me mixed up in a *mêlée* he was to come along with his axe. The carpenter, a Scotchman as usual, looked at me and said, "Na, na, sirr, Ah canna dae that." I got very indignant, whereupon he explained that it was the axe he objected to. He said, "Ma weepuns arr ma han'saw an' a broad cheesul, for ye ken, if Ah mak a stroak at a mahn wi ma axe an miss him, he'll hev ma befoar Ah can recover masel, but Ah defy him tae hold on tae ma han'saw, an if he did why Ah'd juist lop aff his han' at the wrist wi ma cheesul." I subsequently found him a good useful man in a row at Akyab when I chased the whole crew out of the ship and laid her up, times being bad and freights nowhere.' Some day, I hope, Captain Lecky's life will be written for his fellow merchant seamen, to the lasting benefit (I believe) of the latter. But at present there is nought remaining for me to write but my grateful appreciation of the courtesy that has enabled me to pay my small tribute to the greatness of one whom I consider to have been the greatest Merchant Seaman of his century.